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The Orphanage of Things: A Narrative of Abandonment

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The Orphanage of Things

A narrative of abandonment

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Malaz Elgemiabby

Doha, Qatar
May 2015

Signatures Page

Approval certificate for **Malaz Elgemiabby** for the thesis project entitled **The Orphanage of Things, A narrative of abandonment**. Submitted to the faculty of the Master of Fine Arts in Design Studies of Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar, in partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Design Studies.

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And saving the best for last:
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Thank you Khalid Dousa, my dear husband for your constant support and belief in me. If it weren't for your encouragement, I would have dropped out of the program a long time ago. Thank you to my Father Dr. Elgemiabby, without your support I wouldn't have been able to perform in Sudan. And finally, thank you to my mother Samia Shabo who is a pioneer businesswoman in Sudan and great model for me, and many others.

To my family...

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Abstract

In Sudan, 110 babies are abandoned in the streets of Khartoum every month. The majority of abandoned children are born out of wedlock.¹ Young women with illegitimate pregnancies are often ostracized by their families and society, and the lack of emotional, financial and legal support has led many to take desperate measures, including the abandonment of their children.

Relinquishing mothers exist like ghosts in Sudanese society. The only evidence of the mother's experience is her anonymous, abandoned child. In order to understand and examine this phenomenon, I used ethnographic performance art informed by design research practice (Performative Research Design). I performed various acts of abandonment to examine the mechanism and psychology of the act of abandonment.

I endeavored through concrete, lived experiences to better empathize with the relinquishing mother and create awareness of the wider psycho-social complexities of child abandonment.

1. "TECHNICAL BRIEFING PAPER 1 : UNICEF SUDAN ALTERNATIVE FAMILY CARE." Www.unicef.org. August 1, 2007. Accessed April 24, 2015. http://www.unicef.org/sudan/UNICEF_Sudan_Technical_Briefing_Paper_1_-_Alternative_family_care.pdf.

Introduction

Problem Statement

1- "TECHNICAL BRIEFING PAPER 1 :
UNICEF SUDAN ALTERNATIVE FAMILY
CARE." *www.unicef.org*. August 1,
2007. Accessed April 24, 2015. [http://
www.unicef.org/sudan/UNICEF_Su-
dan_Technical_Briefing_Paper_1_-_Al-
ternative_family_care.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/sudan/UNICEF_Sudan_Technical_Briefing_Paper_1_-_Alternative_family_care.pdf).

In 2004, there were over 143 million orphans and abandoned children in ninety-three developing countries. This number represents 8.4 % of the total number of the children in the world. (UNICEF). In 2003, UNICEF conducted a study in Sudan that revealed that approximately 110 babies were abandoned every month in the streets of Khartoum, which constituted more than 1,320 babies per year. Only half of the infants survive and gain admittance to Maygoma Orphanage, the only state orphanage. The study also revealed that a majority of abandoned babies were born out of wedlock.¹

Illegitimate pregnancy is stigmatized in Sudan and raises issues related to sex, morality, religion, law and the rivalry between parental and community authority. Young women with illegitimate pregnancies are often ostracized by their families and society, and the lack of emotional, financial and legal support has led many to take desperate measures, including abandoning their children.¹ A mother who abandoned her child will be referred to as a relinquishing mother.

Justification

My family has been involved with the Maygoma orphanage in Sudan since 2003. My father managed the facility from 2006 until 2010. My two adopted brothers were abandoned anonymously as infants, and both required medical treatment before they were admitted to the orphanage. Consequently, this topic is not only interesting to me in general, but is also very close to my heart.

When I visited the Maygoma orphanage in Khartoum in 2014, I found the number of abandoned children increased, the solutions and interventions available remained limited.

My background is in Architecture, and because of this I was asked on several occasions to design a more adequate facility for abandoned children. However, the government and the society at large didn't understand the scope, and complexity of the issue of abandoned children. As a designer, I felt that I needed to understand all aspects of this issue in order to address this problem in an insightful, empathetic and effective manner. Moreover, as a new mother I felt a bond with the mothers who felt compelled to separate themselves from their own children.



Fig.1: A nurse at Maygoma Orphanage handling an infant

Delimitation

The literature on relinquishing mothers in Sudan is scant, and the act of abandonment itself is shrouded in secrecy and shame. Most babies are abandoned anonymously at hospitals, or are found by community members in private or public places (figure2). Relinquishing mothers exist like ghosts in Sudanese society. While it is possible, though still sensitive to speak about the well being of abandoned children in Sudan, the relinquishing mother’s experience is all but unmentionable. Society remains extremely judgmental and unsympathetic towards the relinquishing mother.

The main obstacle I faced was in identifying mothers in order to conduct this research. I contacted the orphanage and some of the organizations that work on child abandonment issues. I also attempted to get contact details of mothers who were prosecuted under the unlawful sex act, but I was unable to get any names or records of the mothers.

In order to circumvent these challenges, I used ethnographic performance art studies informed by design studies (Performative Research Design). I performed the act of abandonment by giving up things of value to me.

The objective of these performances was to examine the mechanism and psychology inherent in the act of abandonment to understand the relinquishing mother’s point of view in order to raise awareness of the psycho-social complexities of child abandonment.



Fig.2: Babies are abandoned anonymously and admitted to Maygoma Orphanage

Background

**Social Stigma
toward illegitimate
pregnancy**

1-Rida Fozi, "Marriage in Islam." *Public Discourse*. May 23, 2012. Accessed April 24, 2015. <http://www.thepublic-discourse.com/2012/05/5464/>

In conservative Muslim Sudanese society marriage is a highly respected institution. In Islam, marriage is described as half of one's religious life. Islam views this bond as a sacred institution, one that allows for procreation, insures that communities will flourish, and that the next generation will be full of God-fearing men and women. The prophet Mohamed (PBUH) proclaimed that, "There is no institution more beloved to God than the institution of marriage."¹ Marriage is not observed as just a relationship between two people but also social institution, and spiritual perfection.

The act of engaging in any sexual activity outside the framework of marriage is considered a major sin. The 1991 Sudanese Penal code, which is heavily based on Islamic Sharia Law, stated that the penalty for an unmarried person convicted of fornication is hundred public lashes, while the penalty for a married person who is convicted of adultery is death by public stoning. Pregnancy is considered compelling evidence for convicting a woman, and since no paternity testing is required most these sentences are almost always only carried out solely on women. The rationale for punishment is to reinforce social stigma, and set an example, therefore discouraging other women from committing the same crime.

Sudan is a community-centric society that places a high value on family reputation. A woman's sexual purity is an emblem of family honor. Illegitimate pregnancy is often regarded as a delinquent act that signifies a lack of moral, religious and social values, and is consequently the cause of grave dishonor to the family.

In 2008, the New York Times featured a story about Nariman Siddiq Ahmed Ali, a Sudanese baby who was abandoned along a road and was brought to Maygoma Orphanage by strangers. The article captured the grim circumstances of his abandonment, and the stigma that spurned his relinquishment:

Strangers found him in late February after he was dumped on a roadside in a far-flung suburb of this booming capital. Almost certainly he was the product of an illicit union, the writhing, irrefutable evidence of adultery or fornication in a country where that could mean a lifetime of shame or even death – for the mother and the child. ¹

Honor killing, the homicide of a member of a family by other members, due to the belief that the victim has brought shame or dishonor upon the family, or has violated the principles of a community or a religion, is widely practiced in Sudan. However, there are no accurate statistics on the number of victims because these incidents often go unreported.

**Social Stigma
toward illegitimate
pregnancy**

1-Lydia Polgreen, "Overcoming Customs and Stigma, Sudan Gives Orphans a Lifeline." *The New York Times*, April 5, 2008, Africa sec. Accessed April 24 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/05/world/africa/05orphans.html>

Physical and psychological health of relinquishing mother

1-Dr.Mohamed Elgemiabby (former manager of Maygoma Orphanage in Sudan) in discussion with the author, September 2014.

2-Joyce Kinaro, Tag Elsir Mohamed Ali, Rhonda Schlangen, and Jessica Mack. "Unsafe Abortion and Abortion Care in Khartoum, Sudan." *Reproductive Health Matters* 17, no. 34, (November 2009) : 71-77

3-David A, Grimes. "Unsafe Abortion: The Preventable Pandemic." *The Lancet* 368, no. 9550 (November 2006) : 1911.

4-H.A. Askren, and K.C. Bloom, "Postadoptive Reactions of the Relinquishing Mother: A Review". *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic, & Neonatal Nursing* 28, no. 4 (July 1999) : 395-400.

In Sudan, the physical trauma of the expectant mother starts as soon as the unwanted pregnancy is detected. Abortion is illegal for unwanted illegitimate pregnancies, but many mothers will attempt an unsafe self-induced abortion.
Dr. Elgemiabby, the former manager of Mygoma orphanage in Sudan sums up the situation in the following quotation :

Abortion is illegal in Sudan, unwed pregnant girls often attempt self-abortion or secretly go to midwives in exchange for cash. When they go to hospitals they will be insulted and even abused and even risk imprisonment. For this reason, [young girls] often seek being treated by an untrained provider rather than going to a trained doctor. As a result both lives of mother and baby will be at great risk and many babies if survive suffer sever mutations and disabilities .1

Sudan has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world. It is estimated by UNICEF that there are 1,107 deaths per 100,000 live births. Unsafe abortions contribute significantly to this number (fig.3).² Even if both mother and baby survived these attempts, most unmarried mothers don't have access to proper prenatal care in Sudan, which can have significant effect on their wellbeing. Unintended pregnancies often are accompanied by poor prenatal care. The end result is children with low birth weights, and developmental issues. Grimes (2006).³

Although there are no studies on relinquishing mothers in Sudan, some researches worldwide on mothers who relinquished their babies for adoption revealed that tsome fo them suffered secondary infertility later in life. (Asken and Bloom 1999) ⁴

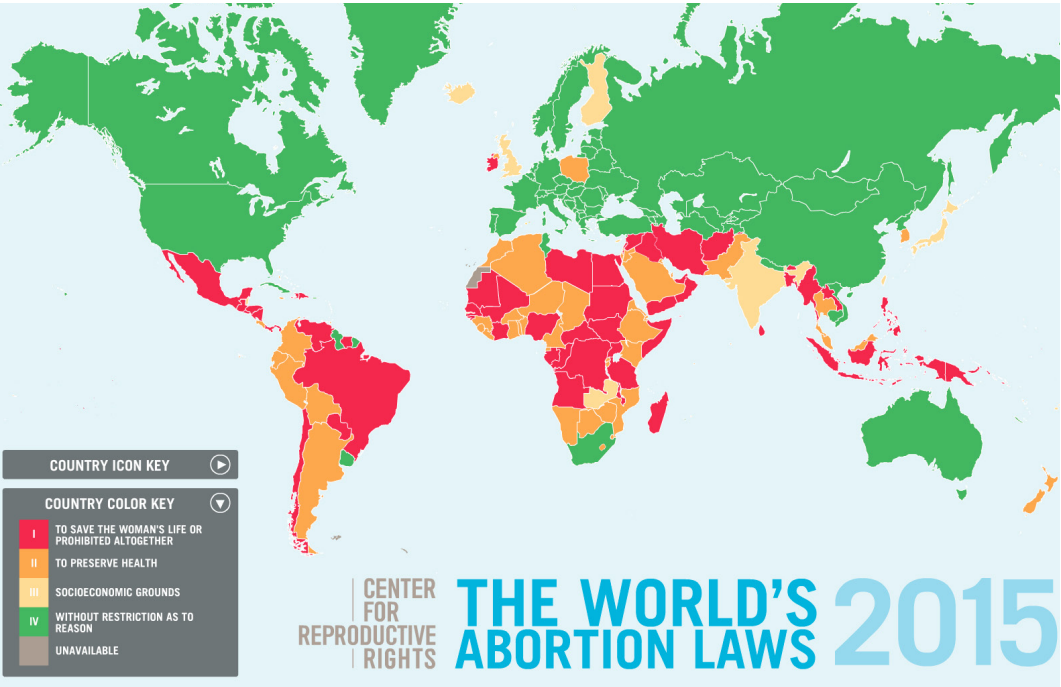


Fig.3: The World's Abortion Laws 2015.

Unresolved Grief

In the limited literature on relinquishing birthmothers conducted in other countries a recurring theme is grief. According to Blanton and Deschner (1990), the grief is protracted, and “Relinquishing mothers have more grief symptoms than women who have lost a child to death, including more denial; despair, atypical responses; and disturbances in sleep, appetite, and vigor.” ¹ The experience of loss can result in a chronic bereavement for the rest of a woman’s life.

1-T.Blanton, and J. Deschner, “Biological mothers’ grief: The postadoptive experience in open versus confidential adoption.” *Child Welfare*, no. 69 (1990) : 525-35.

2-J. Condon, “Psychological disability in women who relinquish a baby for adoption.” *The Medical Journal of Australia* 144, (1986) :118.

3-J.Logan, (1996). “Birth mothers and their mental health: Uncharted territory.” *British Journal of Social Work* 26, no. 5 (996) : 609-625.

Mothers reported struggling with unresolved grief, sometimes for more than three decades, and they experience pronounced symptoms of mourning at every anniversary of the relinquishment. Some of the other psychological effects are lack of self esteem, abandonment of previous life goals, such as educational goals, PTSD, nightmares, and anxiety, and phobic reactions. This was experienced by a number of birth mothers with ongoing serious consequences for development of their full potential as human beings. “Over half of these women are suffering from severe and disabling grief reactions which are not resolving with the passage of time and which manifest predominantly as depression and psychosomatic symptoms.” Condon (1986) ²

The relinquishment experience also affects the woman’s mental health Logan, J. (1996) discovered that more than 32% of birth mothers were subjected to psychiatric treatment, and almost a quarter of them had attempted suicide (fig.4). ³

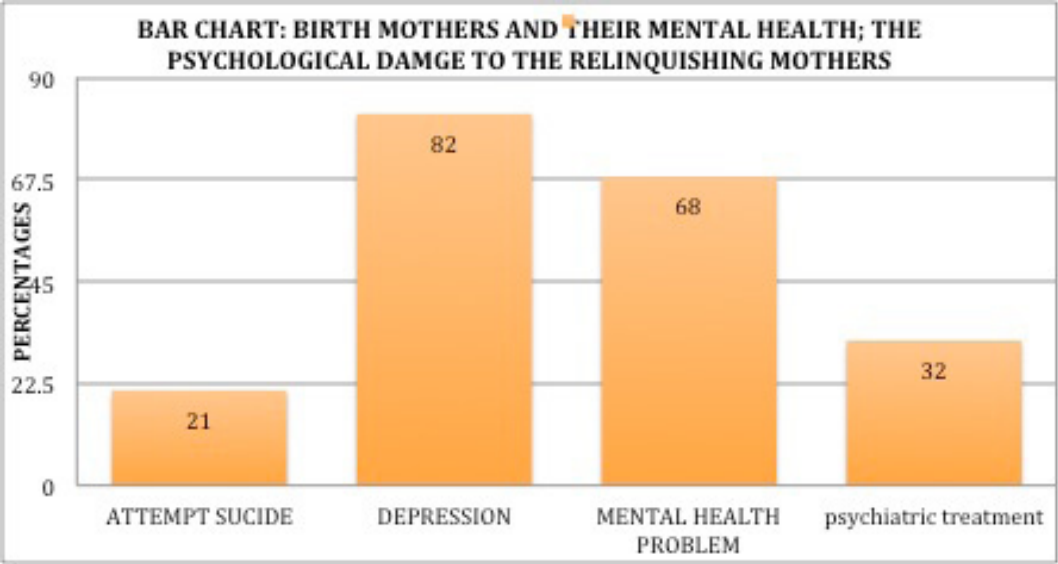


Fig.4: Data illustrated from J.Logan, (1996). “Birth mothers and their mental health: Uncharted territory.” *British Journal of Social Work* 26, no. 5 (996) : 609-625.

Performance Art

1-Roselee Goldberg, Performance Art: from Futurism to the Present, (NY:Thames & Hudson, 2001) 8

The method developed to conduct this investigation lies in the realm of both performance art and design. Performance art was used because it supports the core nature of this investigation. This approach allowed me to inform my performances with research, while the performances produced personal and public reactions that in turn informed the research process. It is also proved to be a compelling medium to raise public awareness, an outcome that was one of the main objectives of this thesis. In short, as Goldberg stated, " Performance has been a way of appealing directly to a large public, as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their own notions of art and its relation to culture" ¹

Performance art Documentation

2-.Auslander, Philp. "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," Performance Arts Journal 28, no. 3 (septembre 2006) : 1.

There is an ongoing debate on the documentation of performance art. On the one hand, the relationship between performance and its documentation is traditionally seen as ontological. As Auslander noted, " It is assumed that the documentation of the performance event provides both a record of it through which it can't be reconstructed and evidence that it actually occurred." ² This applies to most of the classical performances and body art from the 1960s and 1970s. One of the most famous examples are the photographs of Chris Burden's performance "Shoot." The image of the bullet served as evidence that the event actually took place (fig.5). Similarly, the work of Marina Abromavic in "Rhythm 0," served as a documentation of the event, a testimony to its reality (fig.7). However, both documentations conveyed more than just evidence, they conveyed the residue of these events. These residues trigger certain empathic responses in the viewer than can provide more than just acknowledgement, but also understanding.

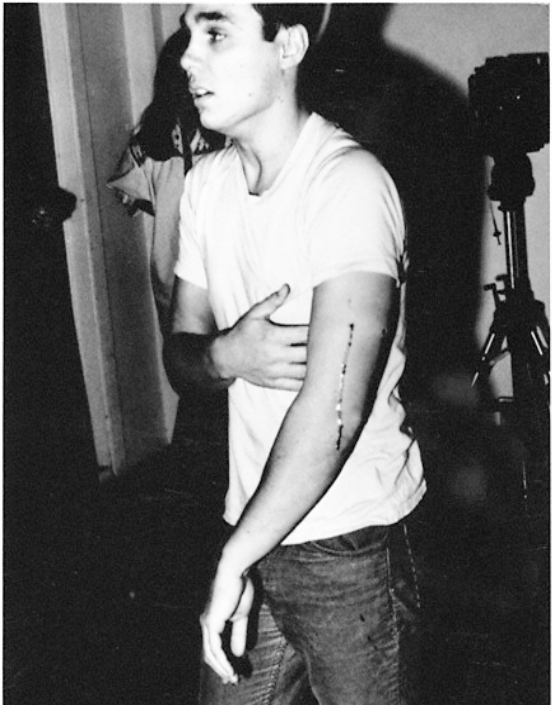


Fig.5: Shoot performance at F-Space Gallery in Santa Ana, California, 1971



Fig.6: Yves Klein - Leap Into The Void / Le Saut Dans Le Vide, 1960

3-Auslander, Philp. "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *Performance Arts Journal* 28, no. 3 (septembre 2006) : 3.

Conversely, there are performers who used the documentation not to record a real event, but to create the performance itself. The intention was to reach the audience through this documentation to allow them to form their own understanding outside the realm of the event itself. An example is the photograph of Yves Klein's famous "Leap into the Void," 1960. In the photograph there is an image of the artist falling from a second floor window. In real life, this performance never took place; the photograph was completely constructed by the artist to create the effect (fig.6). The performance in this case only took place in the medium of documentation. Auslander identifies this second category of performance art as theatrical documentation. It includes the cases in which performances were staged solely to be documented which he referred to as the performative aspect of documentation.

He contends that, "If one insists upon the ontological relationship by demanding that to qualify as performance, an event must have autonomous existence prior to its documentation, then the event underlying the works in the second category are not performances at all and the images are not documents, but something else, another kind of artwork." 1

The relationship between the documentation and audience is also the subject of further speculation. Traditionally the documentation has focused on the artwork itself and not the audience's experience. It was very rare that the audience's perception of the performance was documented. Indeed, there are many examples where the audience was not even aware of the performance (Blinks, by Vito Acconci 1969). This practice of documentation of performance art in line with the fine art tradition of reproduction of work rather than capturing a life event. This is particularly provocative to those who consider performance as a one-time event, one that due to its very nature cannot be represented or reproduced.



Fig.7: Marina Abramović - Rhythm 0, 1974.

It is clear that there is special importance placed on the subject of documentation, and since this thesis contains several performances, private and public, various medium of documentation will be used. Both arguments are important to this thesis as a formal academic document and therefore traditional documentation is necessary as an evidence of the investigations. Additionally, documentation is used as a medium to communicate resides these experiments to a larger audience.

1-Amelia Jones, "The Live Artist as Archaeologist, Interview between Amelia Jones and Marina Abramovic." *In Perform, Repeat, Record Live Art in History*. (Bristol: Intellect, 2012) 545.

It is essential in this case that this thesis will continue to explore best documentation method that capture these residues, and that the mode of documentation is appropriate to the type of performance.

The various methods of documentation used here are: journals, photographs, video and audio recordings, artefacts, and experiences. The thesis is also documented on a web blog, providing a platform for the public to interact with the performer at anytime during this thesis, whether in form of comments, feedback or questions. This real time interaction strengthened the public performance aspect of the thesis, and is reflective of performance Artist Marina Abramovich's contention that, "Now Performance is very much work with interrupted action; it is about not just the artist's experience but that of the public"¹

The Artist in Present by Marina Abramovich

2-Holland Cotter, "700-Hour Silent Opera Reaches Finale at MoMA." *The New York Times*, May 30, 2010. Accessed February 14, 2015. http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/31/arts/design/31diva.html?_r=0

Unquestionably Marina Abramovich is one of the most highly acclaimed performance artists in our lifetime. In a performance that took place in the Museum of Modern Art in New York city and took its name from the title of the exhibition itself, Marina Abramovich sat entirely still, in silence, in a chair, across from museum visitors, for 750 hours. Close to 1,400 people occupied the other seat, some for only a minute or two, a few for an entire day. The New York Times described why her work was considered a great success by noting that, "the atrium performance works because she is simply, persistently, uncomfortably there"²

Fig.8: The Artist in Present by Marina Abramovich in MOMA 2010



Lactation station
and milk Bar by Jess
Dobkin

1.Charles Reeve, "The Kindness of
Human Milk: Jess Dobkin's Lactation
Station Breast Milk Bar." *Gastronomica*
9, no. 1 (winter 2009) : 66-73

The lactation station is one of Jess Dobkin's most ac-claimed performances. It is known for bringing contro-versy to her work, especially around sexuality. In this performance she invited the public to taste pasteurized human breast milk that was donated to her by sever-al women. According to curator and art critic Charles Reeve, her intention was to provoke a discussion around the topic, and "she hoped that the audience [would] discuss the challenging and most intimate maternal rite of breastfeeding with a sense of play and without judg-ment."¹ The documentations of this performance falls in the realm of performative photography as Jess Dobkins never produced the milk herself but uses the photo-graph to communicate her performance.



Fig.9: The Lactation Station by Jess
Dobkin 2006

Crucifixion by
Sebastian Horsley

2. Catherine Milner, "British Painter
Suffers Crucifixion for His Art." *The Tel-
egraph*. May 26, 2002. Accessed April
24, 2015. [http://www.telegraph.co.uk/
education/3297150/British-painter-suf-
fers-crucifixion-for-his-art.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/3297150/British-painter-suffers-crucifixion-for-his-art.html).

In his work Crucifixion Sebastian Horsely unlike other traditional artist attempted to get closer to the psychic of the experience which he viewed as crucial to his under-standing of the work. Horsley publicly crucified himself in a ceremony held in the Philippines to gain an under-standing of the experience of Jesus.He described the complex reaction to being crucified:

*"The physical effects of being crucified are
nothing to do with the psychological ones; the
early pictures were raw and bloody, but being
crucified took me to a place where I felt alone and
isolated. I was trying to communicate something
more sublime....I am saying that to create a work
of art you have to have some distance from it."*²

The learning from this performance has inspired his painting project Crucifixion exhibited at Crucifix Lane project.



Fig.10: Crucifixion by Sebastian
horsley 2002

Methodology

Performative Research Design

1. Brad Haseman, "A Manifesto for Performative Research." *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, Theme Issue "Practice-led Research", (2006) : 98.

Performative research design allows one to practice more diverse methodologies in design research. Haseman describes performative research as a way to break out of more traditional options. He argues that:

"Taking its name from J. L. Austin's speech act theory, performative research stands as an alternative to the qualitative and quantitative paradigms by insisting on different approaches to designing, conducting and reporting research"¹.

While this description opens up new paradigms for the research process, it also creates a unique overlap for the role of the researcher and designer.

The method developed to conduct this investigation spans the realm of many disciplines: ethnography, performance art, and design. The reason performance art is used is because it supports the core nature of my investigation. It addresses the ethnographic aspect of my inquiry, and casts the researcher as a performer. The findings present as personal reactions to certain situations creating an ideal medium to invite the public to understand the topic.

I produced 9 performances, each designed to explore a certain aspect of the relinquishing mother's experience. The first step was to establish the values of the abandoned entities. These values could be emotional, sentimental, physical, financial, and/or social.

The second step was to design the performance, and the context of each performance. There was no fixed scenario for all performances, however the overall all structure of the performances should provide answers to foundational questions. The most important part of these performances was documentation. The residue of these performances provided the learning outcome of this thesis

Performances

The Abandonment of Breastmilk-1



Inspiration

There are many physical and psychological changes that are connected to motherhood. One is the production of breast milk. The production of breast milk starts shortly after birth. Breastfeeding is widely advocated practices for nurturing the child and strengthening the maternal bond. An inquiry into how relinquishing mothers respond to the natural physical consequences of having a child inspired this performance.

In Australia, for example, breast binding was practiced at the hospital to prevent the milk flow of relinquishing mothers.

In Islam relations formed from sharing breastmilk are equated with blood relationships. This performance is unique in a sense that it wasn't entirely metaphorical. During an MFA department field trip to Italy, I was separated from my breastfeeding 18-month-old son for the first time. This temporary abandonment caused genuine emotions and physical consequences.

Value

The value of breastfeeding for me is unquestionable. My breastmilk not only provide essential and valuable nutrient for my beloved child, but was also a significant bonding tool. It also necessitated a rigorous feeding schedule that my entire life was shaped around.

Process

From the first day In Venice, Italy, I started expressing my breastmilk every night. After five days I accumulated 350ml of breastmilk, and transfered it into a regular water bottle. I was physically in pain due to breast engorgement, so expressing was a source of physical relief, but every drop of milk reminded me of my separation from my son.



Fig.12: Expressed breastmilk-1



Fig.13: Pouring the breastmilk in the Venice Grand Canal, Venice, Italy

Performance

I boarded a boat, and set up a video camera to capture the action. I then held the milk bottle in my hand and poured the milk into the Venice Grand Canal while the boat was sailing.(Duration: 25 seconds)

Learning

The process of breastfeeding is itself a form of abandonment. Prior to being separated from my son, I produced the milk, it went to my son, it nourished him, and helped him thrive. After this performance, there was this sense of ambiguity. I struggled with a sense of not knowing the final destination of my milk and I had no sense of closure in terms of what happened to my abandoned milk. The loss of the breastmilk happened too quickly, and it wasn't until I saw the empty bottle in my hand that I have actually came to face the reality of what I had done. My precious milk was gone and wasted. I struggled with grief for the following few days. Although my milk was gone, it remained psychologically present in my mind and this presence manifested in the artwork I created during a clay workshop we had during these days.

1 .Pauline Boss, "Ambiguous loss."

Living beyond loss: Death in the family
(New York: Norton, 1991): 166.

In a similar manner the loss felt by the relinquishing mother is unique because of its ambiguous nature. Boss describes ambiguous loss as "one that is not final due to the fact that the loved one is psychologically present, but physically absent."¹

Anonymous relinquishment is complicated because the future identity and fate of the child remains unknown to the birthmother. This inquiry about her ambiguous loss can continue to be present in her mind for many years, and this type of grief can be extremely difficult to resolve.



The Abandonment of Breastmilk-2



Inspiration

Grief is a natural response to our human loss, however the significant guilt I experienced from the first performance led me to question the manner in which the abandonment happened. Pouring the milk in the canal felt very wasteful. This performance was designed around less profligate circumstances, yet it still remained a valuable loss.

One of the ways people deal with grief is by creating ritual. Rituals provide closure and a signal to move on with recovery. Burial and mourning are all rituals related to resolving grief. The natural impulse of seeking company and acknowledgement from others is also important to our healing process

Value

The value of breastfeeding for me is unquestionable. My breastmilk not only provide essential and valuable nutrient for my beloved child, but was also a significant bonding tool. It also necessitated a rigorous feeding schedule that my entire life was shaped around.

Process

I repeated the same routine of daily expressing, however the milk production gradually decreased due to lack of demand, until it completely stopped on the fourth day. The amount produced was approximately 175ml of milk.



Fig.16: Expressed breastmilk-2

Performance

I sat at a table with four chairs. I then placed a plate with assorted pastries in front of me. I poured the breastmilk from the bottle into a glass and waited for three other people to arrive. When they arrived, I started sipping slowly from the milk while engaging in causal conversations.

Learning

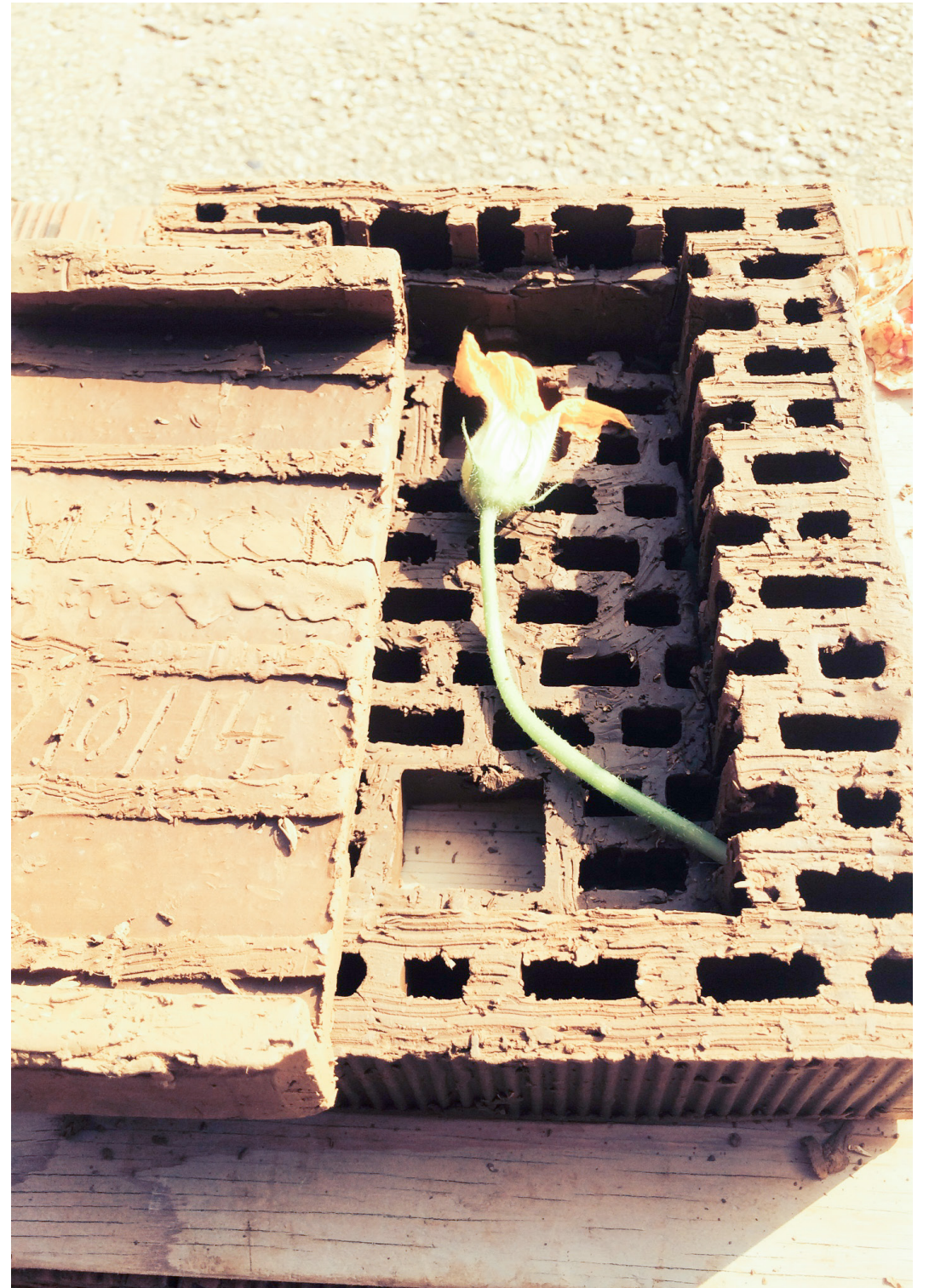
There is a social sensitivity around breast milk. This was very evident after my first performance. One of my colleagues called it a disgusting act to handle breastmilk in any visible form. There is a social understanding that consumption of breastmilk is strictly for babies, and while an adult can drink cow milk, drinking your own milk is awkward and even repulsive. During the performance embarrassed and ashamed, I anticipated the reaction of my colleagues. Had they known that not only was my breast milk visible but I was drinking it in front of them would they be disgusted? Would they still sit at the table? How would it impact our relationship.? It was because of my overpowering feelings of shame and embarrassment that I continued to grieve my loss in secrecy.

Illegitimate pregnancy has its own taboo, for which there is much shame attached. This shame continues to enforce itself by the act abandonment. A mother who is willing to abandon her own newborn is often labeled as selfish, and cruel among many other things. Shame contributes greatly to this secret cycle of abandonment that prevents both mothers and society to acknowledge it.



Fig.17: The full breakfast ensemble

The Abandonment of Marcon



Inspiration

I was the only mother in our group. In the previous two performances I experienced abandonment of a thing of high personal value. Personal value plays an important role in the abandonment process, but how would this be affected when our values are shared with others. During our group workshop organized by MUNLAB in Turino, Italy, each participant was required to create an artistic expression using a raw brick block that would be transported to Qatar.

Value

Marcon is the name of the artwork I designed. All participants in the workshop created their artwork using a standard freshly formed raw brick from the factory. The bricks were made from mixture of clay from the local query and corn straws. The symbolic structure served as a tomb for a dead rat that we found at the entrance of the facility. Elina, the factory manager explained apologetically that dead rats were considered a sign of neglect and decay. The holes in this burial chamber contained seeds of pomegranates that were harvested locally. The concept was to turn a legacy of decay to that of prosperity. The dead rat that is stigmatized and deemed unwanted provided the organic nutrient to nurture and foster the seeds.

Process

The workshop ended the following day before noon. The teachers announced their collective agreement that our creations were not worth the expense of transportation, nor did they hold any artistic value to be fired and stored in the factory's outdoor museum. I considered transporting my artwork work at my own expense, but I quickly dismissed the idea out of fear of being stigmatized for walking around with a cheap block of clay that everyone else considered useless. Students and professors started taking photographs of their work and simply left them on the table to be trashed. One of MUNLAB team members agreed to participate in the ceremony I designed for the abandonment of Marcon



Fig.19: Abandoned clay sculptures by other students

Performance

I met the artist at noon at the agreed location. Marcon was placed at the end of a long brick bench structure in the middle between the two of us. We held the cover slate in our hands and exchanged the adoption agreement. Simultaneously we broke the slate in two halves, and I left the premises with one half in my hand.

Learning

In this performance I learned about social value and its impact on abandonment. Although there was significant talent, energy and time invested in this work, both the students and teachers considered the social value of our artifacts of very little significance and hence they were promptly abandoned.

The social value of an illegitimate child is considerably low in Sudan. This is reflected in the poor adoption rate, and legal and social discriminatory practices. The lack of social value in this circumstance can hugely influences the mother's perception of the value of her child which can ultimately lead to abandonment.



The Abandonment of The Soul Maker



Inspiration

After abandoning my artifact in the previous performance, I was inspired to further investigate the role of the social value in abandonment. In this performance the object of my abandonment was both socially and personally of higher value.

Value

Inspired by the Sufi character of Darvish, *The Soul Maker* is a unique performance design machine I designed and fabricated in 2014 during the MFA Studio and visual communication class at Virginia Commonwealth University in Qatar. By using rotomolding technology, the machine captures one’s breath inside a balloon and molds it into physical orbs made of a mixture of plaster and concrete. Each individual sphere serves as a memory of our own human creation.

The Soul Maker stands as an independent work, and also as part of the collaborative project *Souvenirs* created by Samreen Zahra and Othman Khunji. The project was well received by both media and art critics. It represented the university at many local and international exhibitions. The value placed around this artwork also increased my value as an emerging designer. It provided a boost to my portfolio when it was selected by *Wallpaper* magazine to be featured in the 2015 Salone Milano.

Process

Souvenirs was selected to be the centerpiece at the Learning Festival at Katara cultural Village in Doha, Qatar. I arrived with my colleague early to set up the exhibition. For several days we attended to the pieces and presented them to visitors. The event lasted for a week, and after we were expected to transport our work back to our studio. My colleagues were eager to pick up their work, and the department director reminded us repeatedly of the importance of transporting it back or risk losing it forever. Failing to return it would not only represent a loss for me, but also for others, especially my colleagues and the MFA program.



Fig.22: Blowing my breath into balloon



Fig.23: Rotating the mixture inside the balloon mold



Fig.24: The outcome: the breath is trapped inside concrete and sand spheres

Performance

I exhibited *The Soul Maker* at the Learning Festival. I abandoned it in place on the last day of the exhibition.

Learning

This performance confirmed that social value plays an important part in the process of abandonment, and certainly increases the intensity of grief. I experienced self inflicted guilt, and regretted abandoning *The Soul Maker* especially after seeing the disappointment of my colleagues, compounded by losing my future opportunities to exhibit the piece. Fueled by regret, I returned the second day to retrieve my piece, but it was already gone.

When abandonment is done anonymously it is extremely difficult for mothers who regret their actions to reclaim the child. Many babies don't survive the trauma of abandonment, and it requires substantial resources to trace them. This comparison between high and low social values resonated with the different levels of stigma for the male and female parent of an illegitimate child. The man is rarely stigmatized. In a conservative country, men are granted more freedom. The social value of the man is certainly higher in a male centered society. A women are more vulnerable to being abandoned by her family and society.



The Abandonment of Voice



Inspiration

Silence is a residue of shame. In previous performances I experimented with abandoning objects that had different values to me. In this performance I investigated the loss of identity that held significant value for me.

Value

People around me identify me as an expressive and outspoken person. As an actively communicative person, and an extrovert, I get my energy from talking and listening to people. Even when it isn't socially acceptable to be expressive and talkative as a female, it doesn't change who I am, or my personality. By abandoning an aspect of myself that is so elemental, so vital, to who I am and how I make meaning for others, and myself, and something so vital to everyday life, I opened myself to the profound psychological and social impact of this loss.

Process

The concept was to design an object that would communicate both inability, but also reflect an element of coercion. The baby pacifier I designed signified the condition that led to my silence.

The mask was cast directly on my face using plaster sheets with thin wires to connect them.



Fig 27: Applyig layers of wet plaster sheet directly on my face



Fig.28: Mask drying



Fig.29: inserting the pacifier in the mask

Performance

I entered a room where an audience was waiting for me to speak; I wore the mask and sat silently while members of the audience presented the work on my behalf. I took off the mask at the end of the presentation, but continued to not speak for the duration of a week. I only spoke to my son during that period, but everyone else was included in this performance, such as family and friends. I went to classes regularly, and an exhibition of my work took place during this period. On the 7th day I returned to the same room where the audience expected me to speak. This time I did.

During this time, moved by strong emotions I cried frequently. I collected and stored my stores every time I cried during the seven days.

Learning

I experienced significant psychological distress from not communicating for a week. I felt helpless, vulnerable and abandoned. The reaction of others triggered by my silence was particularly interesting. The empathy level varied noticeably, for example some cried and hugged me, while some avoided me, and completely ignored my presence.

When a mother secretly abandons her child she also abandons her identity as a mother. Through her silence she is violating a sacred social contract. This silence then triggers a reaction from society. The lack of acknowledgment in Sudan of the relinquishing mothers plight can situate these women in a place bereft of empathy and compassion



The Abandonment of the Cat



Inspiration

My son used to play with a stray cat in our compound, one day my husband found it injured and took it to the veterinary clinic. After it was discharged two days later, we fostered it in our house to recover. During that time we anticipated that fostering the cat permanently would not be a good decision due to our busy schedules, travel arrangements, lack of pet experience, and limited financial resources. As time passed we became emotionally attached to it, and we realized that this attachment might jeopardize our decision to abandon it

Value

We invested a considerable amount of money on treatment, vaccination and supplies. Caring for, and training the cat, was also time consuming and frustrating due to our lack of experience. On the other hand the cat was great company for our son and we gave him the name Tigo.

Process

I designed a poster to advertise Tigo’s availability for adoption. The content included a picture and short description of him, and our phone number. The layout was simple, but choosing the color theme was challenging. I didn’t want a bright and celebratory theme, as I felt somehow ashamed.



Fig.32: Advertising Tigo for Adoption

Performance

I found a strategic place to place the poster, in this case it was on the Virginia Commonwealth University Qatar advertisement board. I received a call the following day. I gave Tigo away to the first person who contacted me. I arranged a meeting at our house on same day and finalized the abandonment.

Learning

It was fortunate that the family who adopted the cat turned out to be genuinely nice people. Our rush to abandon him could have led to worse possibilities. This made me feel very selfish and guilty afterward. I realized that during the whole time we were only occupied with our own circumstances, and wanted to restore our previous life conditions. We lacked sufficient emotional attachment and didn't want to deal with the inconvenience of the cat in our life, therefore abandoning it was the most obvious solution to us.

Research suggests that most relinquishing mothers are between 14 and 25 years old, and most of them are still in educational facilities. Falling pregnant outside of wedlock is certainly not a planned event for them, and they aren't prepared to handle the situation alone. Most babies are abandoned immediately after birth. One of the reasons is the lack of resources to conceal a baby, as well as the truncated period of post birth attachment that can complicate the abandonment. I realized that many mothers might be intimidated by the lack of confidence, experience and resources to raise a child on their own.



Fig.32: The cat leaving our house with its new family, my son is looking anxiously

The Abandonment of Max



Inspiration

Abandoning our rescued cat caused me significant guilt. I started volunteering at a local animal rescue center where I learned for the first time to care and interact with dogs and my confidence built up gradually. We eventually decided to adopt a rescued dog permanently in our house, and we called him Max.

Value

Max was settling happily in the house. Our family developed a daily routine of walking together and we quickly became attached to him. I was his main caretaker. His training went well, and he was learning to overcome the trauma of abandonment he experienced previously.

Process

My aunt arrived from Sudan to stay in our house while receiving chemotherapy for her late stage breast cancer. She suffered an immediate panic attack when introduced to Max. The following day my aunt demanded I remove Max from the house completely. She was motivated by the strong social stigma towards dogs, mainly because of religious and health concerns. Family support is an integral part of Sudanese culture; failure to provide support for close family members, especially during distressful times, is considered a substantial dishonor.

The pressure on me to act immediately was increasing, while the guilt and shame for failing to provide for both my aunt and Max were also mounting. Overwhelmed with a sense of powerlessness I reached out to other family members for advice. They all suggested that I abandon Max on the street as soon as possible, and assured me that Max would be survive just fine. I couldn't abandon Max on the street, so I continued searching vigorously for a temporary boarding place until I could find an alternative permanent home for him.



Fig.34: Max on his last day at home

Performance

I placed Max at the rescue center and over the following days I conducted several interviews of families who responded to the adoption post I placed online. I brought Max home while my aunt was out, bathed and groomed him and prepared him to join the new family I selected. They arrived at our house on time and left with Max shortly.

Learning

The feeling of powerlessness and guilt caused me to suffer serious physical pain and depression. My grieving was unacknowledged by my family, and everyone else's lives returned to status quo.

In Sudanese society there is a clear hierarchy of group verses individual, social pressure can skew a mother's decision towards abandonment of her child in favor of that society, but then the society's failing to acknowledge her grief results in her feeling abandoned as well. There is a vicious cycle of abandonment that is not completely understood. It starts well before the act of relinquishing of ones child.

In this circle the focus is always on others, mainly close family members, their interest, their wellbeing, and even their health. The abandonment becomes a negotiation process where the interest of the group dominates the interests of the singular member. Time also plays an important factor in abandonment. A nine month period can seem very long to a mother who is happily anticipating the arrival of her first child, while a mother who is experiencing a series of stressful events with dangerous consequences starting from an illicit sexual act, to an unwanted pregnancy and then a painful birth will experience a different speed and intensity.



The Orphan Performance



Inspiration

There are two types of fear that lead mothers to abandon their babies; fear of social stigma and fear of physical punishment or death. The stigma is so volatile that simply talking about the taboo of relinquishing mothers can cause stigma in itself. Many women also fear the more aggressive and fatal punishment they can suffer under the hand of a family member in the name of honor killing. If she miraculously survived the family autocracy, the legal system has still another set of punishments that can be executed on her. This public performance was designed to address both the experience of fear and stigma.

Value

In Sudan performance art is restricted to traditional theater practice. My performance marked the first time a live interactive art performance was performed in Sudan, and the first time the taboo topic of relinquishing mothers was be publically addressed.

Process

The performance had six elements:

1-The egg:

The egg represented individual opinion, life and value. Throwing an egg represents a degree of aggressiveness while leaving the life inside the egg exposed and vulnerable. The audience represented the various segments of society that projected the stigma of the illegitimately pregnant mother presented through the action of throwing the egg at her.

2-The Eggrus

The design of "The Eggrus," was based on an egg holder and was inspired by the anatomical shape of the female uterus. There were thirty eggrus, twenty were placed in front of the performer, and the remaining ten were given to selected members of the audience. Thirty months are the number of months indicated in the Quran for the duration of natural pregnancy and the breastfeeding cycle.

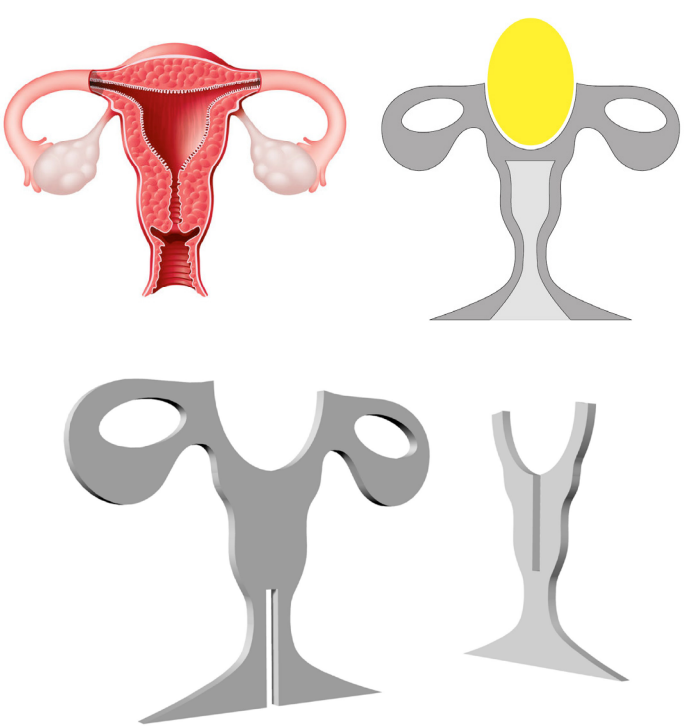


Fig.37,38,39: The eggrus is inspired by the anatomical shape of the female uterus

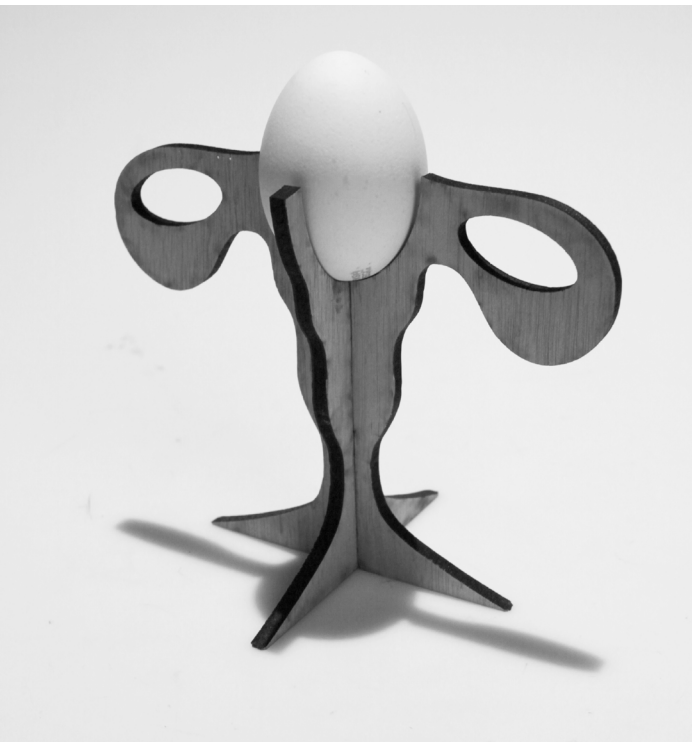


Fig.40: The Eggrus
Material: wood

Process

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3-The costume:

In 2010, a woman was sentenced to death by stoning in Iran. Various protests erupted around the world, and activists created several performances recreating scenes from the penalty.¹

The Parisian activist's attire and posture bear a striking resemblance to the traditional Sudanese Dukhan; In its most traditional definition, Dukhan is the act of smoking of the body while sitting on top of 1 meter deep hole in the ground with burning Acacia wood(Fig.41,42).

The Shamla is the garment a woman wears when performing Dukhan to entrap the smoke inside. The juxtaposing position between the two garments is elemental to the design of the costume. The Shamla is essentially a modest garment, however, bringing something extremely private to such a public level was very provocative to the largely conservative Sudanese audience.

For this performance I designed and created a female garment inspired by the Shamla. It had only two openings, one for the head and the other for the feet. The hands are trapped inside this symbolic garment. The male garment is inspired by the more contemporary Sudanese long tunic and pants of youth attire and exemplifies the freedom exercised by the male members of the society.

4-Heart rate monitor

The recording of the heartbeat replaced the third and fifth segment of the audio of the performance on the video release as live documentation of my experience.



Fig.41 A protester, dressed with a costume to depict a woman stoned to death in Iran, participates in a demonstration in Paris



Fig.42: A woman in Sudan performs dukhan, or a wood smoke bath



Fig.43: A traditional dukhan in Sudan

4-Background music

The performers were silent throughout the piece. The background music consisted of five segments. The first segment highlighted the story of an illicit sexual encounter in dramatic music. The second part reflected the anticipated reaction of family and society, followed by a segment of silence where the audience was expected to interact with the performer. Then dramatic music played again to signal abandonment, and it slowly faded followed by another segment of silence.

6- The Glass Panel

There were two 1mx 2.5m glass panels, standing adjacent to each other. The panels separated the male and female performers. The glass panels were used as a shield to protect the male performer from the eggs thrown at them by the audience as well as containig all the eggs on the side of the female performer.



Fig.44: sketches of the female and male garment for the performance



Fig.45: making the dress at the sewing studio



Fig.46: two glass panels aligned. each panel is 110cmx230cm

Performance

Two glass panels were placed in the middle of the stage. The background sound effects started playing and escalated dramatically. Another male performer and I entered the stage together, I stood in front of one glass panel facing the audience while he stood behind the other panel facing backwards. Random members of the audiences were handed eggs prior to the performance. They were instructed to throw eggs at us while we stood still in front of the glass. When the eggs were all thrown I bended down and placed a baby doll from underneath my garment on the floor. Both the male performer and I walked out of stage slowly, each left in a separate direction. I from where I had entered, while he left the stage from the opposite direction.

Learning

Preparing for this performance was not an easy journey. Up until the last moment I feared that the National Sudanese Security Service would cancel the event and interrogate us. In a country where freedom of speech is a rare commodity, speaking of the ostracism of women in our society was confrontational on many levels. When I was personally confronted with the physical response of the audience, my brain entered a state of fear. My body was numb, and my emotions were frozen.

The performance represented the degrees of fear that attend each step of a relinquishing mother's journey. Fear is the overarching umbrella, the emotion that drives relinquishment. How can the mother reconcile being part of a society that has created such an intricate web of fear? There is the fear of social stigma, the fear of legal prosecution and physical punishment, and fear of losing her life at the hands of her closest members of her family. The fight or flight state of mind that the expectant mother finds herself in is not an overreaction, but it is a genuine condition that every member of this society contributes to.





Fig.49: all the eggs which were placed in the eggurs were thrown by the audience at the performer



Fig.46: Nour Hussain, an abandoned child herself and social activist spoke at the performance



Fig.46: Part of the audience

Conclusion

There are two types of stigma in abandonment, one that is public when the mother is exposed to the society, and one that is secret and even when not exposed she still experiences it. There is a vicious cycle in abandonment; to be stigmatized is to be abandoned by society, to be set apart and no longer belonging to a fabric of community. This abandonment is the worst kind of aloneness there is. By abandoning her own child the mother becomes an orphan herself.

Future directions

Abandoning others also means we become ultimately abandoned too. It is empathy that prevents us from stopping this cycle.

“When you show deep empathy toward others, their defensive energy goes down, and positive energy replaces it. That’s when you can get more creative in solving problems” Stephan Covey

In my future investigations I would like to work on three areas to improve the level of empathy toward relinquishing mothers in our society:

Architecture

A well designed building that addresses the needs of both the other and baby, and provides safe and secure residency either temporarily or permanently.

Public art installation

Design and installation of different public art projects that increase awareness and empathy toward child abandonment and relinquishing mothers.

Religious studies

There is great ambiguity and contradictions in the religious stance on the issue of illegitimate pregnancy and child abandonment. This is very critical in societies where law is directly derived from such beliefs. There is currently very little literature that investigates this territory and enriching this content can be very effective in reaching wider and more influential arms of the society.

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The MFA Exhibition

The Gallery

Virginia Commonwealth University
Qatar





The Orphanage of Things

A narrative of abandonment

In Sudan, 110 babies are abandoned in the streets of Khartoum every month. The majority of abandoned children are born out of wedlock. Young women with illegitimate pregnancies are often ostracized by their families and society and the lack of emotional, financial and legal support has led many to take desperate measures, including the abandonment of their children.

Relinquishing mothers exist like ghosts in Sudanese society. The only evidence of the mother's experience is her anonymous, abandoned child. In order to understand and examine this phenomenon, I used ethnographic performance art informed by design research practice (Performative Research Design). I performed various acts of abandonment to examine the mechanism and psychology of the act of abandonment.

I endeavored through concrete, lived experiences to better empathize with the relinquishing mother and create awareness of the wider psycho-social complexities of child abandonment.

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